

**3. Secularism: The genealogy of *laïcité* in France. Assimilation: from the 19th to the 21st century. Multiculturalism: a hopeful plea for Europe**

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Much like the title of Yolande Jansen's book, *Secularism, Assimilation and the Crisis of Multiculturalism: French Modernist Legacies*, its content is an intellectual mouthful. Jansen has demonstrated that it is still possible – in a time when universities are more and more regulated by the rules of neo-liberalism – for an academic to be a true scholar. She does not allow herself to be restricted by languages, national borders, disciplines or centuries but instead puts forward the best of what critical theory has to offer in her analysis of the concepts of secularism, assimilation and multiculturalism – considering both their genealogy in the 19th century, by

way of the work of Marcel Proust, and their present meaning for Europe. In order to attempt to do justice to the wide range of questions – both scholarly and political – raised in this book, I will interweave a summary of the topics explored with an assessment of the answers provided.

Let me however begin with a cautionary note. This is certainly a book worth reading, studying and reflecting upon (personally as well as in courses on these topics) – but be prepared to struggle with the text. Its richness is like a fine wine that requires patience and a skilled pallet to be fully appreciated. This book covers a great deal of terrain and does not do so superficially. It calls for a committed reader who is willing to go beyond his or her disciplinary boundaries, to spend time exploring topics that are both historical and literary as well as contemporary and actual. This book calls for a close reading that sadly less and less academics are able to afford. Its central argument, which is at the same time a plea for a renewed European multiculturalism (in the spirit of a project of hope or sensibility, etc.), develops slowly by way of an analysis of the crisis of its alternatives: assimilation, secularism and (civic) integration as well as a consideration of the lessons to be learned from the 19th century with regard to the ‘Muslim Question’ in Europe today. Jansen relies on a series of intertwined and complex reasons (some socio-logical and political and others historical, etc.) to justify her conclusion that all these alternatives are highly problematic, a conclusion that partially grounds her attempt to save multiculturalism, in some form or another, in Europe.

Analytically, Jansen structures her investigation along two intersecting axes – each of which could be a complete volume in its own right. The first axis, which is commonly associated with authors such as Taylor (Taylor and Gutmann, 1994), Joppke (Joppke, 2010) and Kymlicka (Kymlicka, 2000), is the discussions of multiculturalism, assimilation and integration. The second axis, which includes philosophers, political theorists, theologians and social scientists, is that with regard to the relationship between religion and secularism, commonly associated with thinkers like Asad (Asad, 2003), Bader (Bader, 2008) and Habermas (Habermas, 2010). This intersectional examination is one of Jansen’s strengths in that it brings together two academic discussions all too often kept apart. The tendency to separate these two frameworks, most often justified in the name of clarity, leads to several problems Jansen highlights in later chapters (e.g. a failure to understand the history of secularism in relation to assimilation policies). However in order to tackle these two axis, Jansen must spend a considerable amount of time defining these highly contested terms as well as sketching their rise and fall in European politics. While she does not venture across the Atlantic, the discussion of the relationship between multiculturalism and assimilation is very important in understanding the different histories in Europe and North America (Banting et al., 2007) as well as the importance of the religion-secularism framework for the former context. The latter investigation would be relevant if Jansen were to further pursue the question of what kind of multiculturalism is possible in Europe.

Chapters 2 and 3 are explorations of different sociological approaches to the concepts of multiculturalism and assimilation (integration fades into the

background after the first chapter). The first is an evaluation of the work done by Gérard Noiriel on assimilation from the perspective of a non-liberal reading of multiculturalism. What becomes clear in this chapter is that Jansen wishes to save a non-liberal kind of multiculturalism in Europe that does not limit its understanding of multiculturalism to a purely 'cultural' question (Jansen, 2014: 61). The issue this raises is whether this is possible – has Europe ever really been multicultural, and can it given its history and the power inequalities between majorities and minorities? While Noiriel's work does attempt to take into consideration this power play, specifically in terms of the racialisation of assimilated youth in France, it is insufficient according to Jansen because of Noiriel's misunderstanding and subsequent rejection of multiculturalism.

The following chapter asks similar questions but within the field of a 'liberal sociology of assimilation' (e.g. migration studies). The authors engaged here are Joppke and Morawska (2003) on the one hand, and Brubaker (1998) on the other – all of whom are read through the frame of liberal theories of assimilation. The liberal perspective reintroduces fundamental political questions such as the space for difference in relation to the private and public spheres, a question that is essential to understanding how the privatisation of religion can actually lead to its radicalisation as well as the importance of not interpreting all 'religions' in the same manner with respect to the importance of publicity, collectiveness, rituals, etc. (Masuzawa, 2005). These authors propose stronger notions of citizenship and assimilation, with a new definition, as a positive alternative to the conception of multiculturalism in crisis in Europe. Jansen's analysis and criticism of these authors is worth reading (and can be read independently of the rest of the book) as is her conclusion that what is needed is a critical concept of assimilation 'to analyse those forms of assimilationism that cannot so easily be uncovered as such precisely because they are called liberal' (Jansen, 2014: 112).

In Transit 1, Jansen takes us back to the 19th century as narrated by Marcel Proust in *In Search of Lost Time*. Inspired by Hannah Arendt for whom the novel 'acts as a primary witness of the emergence of a specifically modern type of racism in the dynamics of assimilation' (Jansen, 2014: 13); Jansen turns to this novel – following a tradition of renowned critical theorists such as Adorno and Benjamin, to re-read Proust in terms of the dynamic highlighted by Arendt. While these parts of her book (transit 1, chapter 4 and chapter 8) may sadly be lost on readers unfamiliar with Proust, they set Jansen's book apart by including the literary as a window into both the past and future. The claim she sets forward to defend is that assimilation in the 19th century (assumably in France) is '*more* like assimilationism today than we might initially think, and *this* might be precisely why it is useful to look at that experience again' (Jansen, 2014: 133). Following upon the previous chapter, Jansen returns to the complex reality described eloquently by Proust with regard to the paradox, or catch-22, of assimilation, that is how assimilation leads to changing practices of Judaism and how its privatisation can lead to its radicalisation (Arendt, 1973). She also uses Proust's account of Alfred Bloch, who had to undergo a series of personal integration tests to be socially 'accepted', to illustrate

her own criticism of the two sociological understandings of assimilation investigated in the previous chapters.

Jansen then traces Proust's criticism of the gap between public-private in the France of the Third Republic, which in the case of the 19th century was between politics and society. The paradox of assimilation is exposed as one in which there appears to be more space for social mobility but is in fact rife with distinctions and non-'erasable' differences tied to a semi-public memory – a memory of 'othering' hidden in secrecy and shame. This question of cultural memory is here intertwined with the two frameworks that provide the girder for Jansen's book: the practices of assimilation in the 19th century as well as the discourse of secularism. For the latter she turns to the writings of Arendt, Bauman and Benbessa through whom she explores the Jewish experience of being 'stuck in a revolving door'. With Bauman she considers his analysis of being 'without control over the rules [of acceptance by the majority], [making it] impossible to win' (Bauman, 1998: 56) by framing it in relation to Benbessa's broader historical account of how 'religions' were brought under control of the state and institutionalised.

From here – via Transit II – we return to the 21st century and specifically the notion of *laïcité* in France today. Jansen criticises the *laïcité*-religion framework because of its inability to free itself from the paradox of assimilation outlined in the previous chapters. In the following chapter, she demonstrates how this framework sustains an unreflected assimilationist heritage and produces a 'semi-public' *culture of laicism*, which while unjust to all religions, specifically targets Islam. In order to develop this argument, we are first offered the philosophical background necessary to understand the 19th century roots of French laicism in thinkers such as Kant and Durkheim. Jansen also connects this to Asad's contemporary analysis of secularism, once again providing a fruitful intellectual bridge between these two centuries. The question being developed here is what work does secularism do when understood as a specific framework for Muslims and minorities today. However, a problem that begins to arise in this, and subsequent, chapters is the slippage between *laïcité* and secularism. While Jansen's claim is that the latter traces its roots to the former, this clear genealogy is often obscured. In addition, the role played by the Republican tradition in France also puts into question the ability to draw conclusions for Europe, or other nation-states, based on whether one takes the French case to be unique or exemplary.

Jansen's addition to Asad's thesis, which calls for a reading of the headscarf not only as a sign of a religious way of being, is to read the headscarf as a 'communication about identity'. In order to develop this complementary thesis, she focuses on the Stasi Report bringing to light the role of power and minority-majority relations in terms of the paradox of assimilation and the religion-secularism framework. She thereby develops her reading of this report, framed in terms of a wider criticism of liberal democracies' reliance on the paradox of assimilation inherent in secularist discourses, by turning to an array of policy makers and thinkers from different disciplines such as: Gilles Kepel, Alain Touraine, Marcel Gauchet, Oliver Roy, etc. While in other parts of the book, this diversity of sources is a strength of

her analysis; it sadly proves here to be a weakness as parts of the argument are lost in translation making it difficult to appreciate her conclusion that based on this analysis of the Stasi Report it is necessary to return to Proust ‘to increase our understanding of the relationship between modernist categories and dichotomies on the one hand, and the emergence of what we might call, ironically, “multicultural conflict after assimilation”, on the other’ (Jansen, 2014: 251).

Chapter 8 combines several different strands of thought by bringing together Proust’s analysis of cultural memory, several critical theorists reading of this analysis (such as the exchange between Adorno and Benjamin), and contemporary perspectives on the relationship between forgetting and memory by theorists such as Deleuze, Bader and Connolly. It adds yet another perspective to the list already amassed in the previous seven chapters with regard to the intra and inter-subjective role of memory as well as the complexities of culture, religious practice and belief, in the face of assimilationist projects. From this highly layered reading of Proust, Jansen extracts the notion of democratic memory that ‘includes refec-tion on the past [that] should enable minorities, complex as they can be, to remember and thematise exclusions and to take critical distance from the stories of majorities’ (Jansen, 2014: 274). The final chapter crosses several themes already spelled out in previous chapters, while at the same time permitting a brief appearance of insight from political theology as well as from other European national contexts into the questions raised concerning the relationship between assimilation and multiculturalism. The final, far too few, pages are a plea to not reject the notion of multiculturalism but to revive it in an alternative form which calls for an ability to question the rules of the hegemonic game itself and a fundamental turning of the gaze towards the power that structures this unjust game of exclusion.

While on the one hand this book is saturated with scholarly analysis, leaving no space for any other perspectives, it seems to me that the analysis provided does not suffice to draw some of the broader promised conclusions.

Although the argument will pass through an analysis of these discourses in France, I will try to make it plausible that these cultural and conceptual layers in laicism also form a relatively unquestioned discursive framework for debates about secularism, and religion more broadly, in contemporary political theory. (Jansen, 2014: 199)

What this leaves the reader with is a string of questions concerning the application of this analysis beyond the rather unique context of France. In this vein, a closer foray into broader questions of political theology, as recently offered by Gil Anidjar’s book (Anidjar, 2014), or a consideration of the non-Republican non-19th century notions of secularism, such as those from the period of the Reformation, could have strengthened this latter argument. Another angle, briefly considered in Chapter 3, which many would argue makes the comparison to the 19th century inapplicable is the question of neo-liberal economics and how this affects the crisis of multiculturalism. Yet perhaps the argument that most deserves to have been

further developed is that which scatters the final pages. Why is multiculturalism worth saving in Europe when the previous nine chapters demonstrate that Europe, or at least France, has never really shown any desire to be hospitable to such a multicultural sensitivity.

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